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ABSTRACT

An immersion program in a public elementary school in Montgomery County, Maryland, uses French as the medium of instruction in academic subjects. The program is based on the theory that language is learned best when there is a need to understand and communicate in that language. All students are eligible for enrollment in the multi-age classes. The Montgomery County curriculum is followed, using French materials. The major aims of the program are for the children to master their school subjects and to acquire substantive fluency in French. Standardized test results show the immersion students to be comparable in ability and achievement to their peers in English-speaking American classes and in French immersion classes in Canada. Immersion in general requires a great deal of planning and extra effort on the part of the teachers. Parents, other adults, and high school students work in the classroom to assist the teachers and to learn French. The program's only added cost to the school system is for foreign language materials. (Author/NCR)

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59

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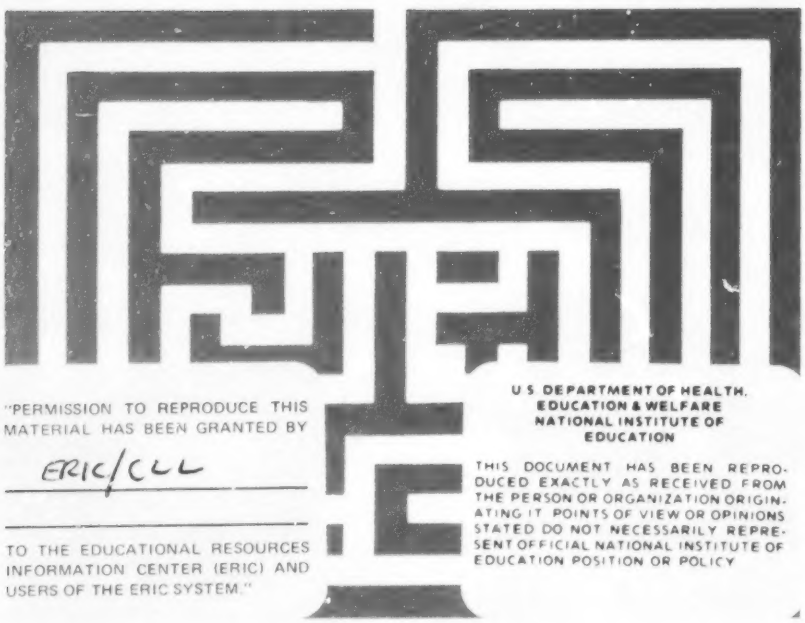
Gabriel H.L. Jacobs



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An American Foreign Language Immersion Program: How To

Gabriel H.L. Jacobs

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ABSTRACT An immersion program in a public elementary school in Montgomery County, Maryland, uses French as the medium of instruction in all academic subjects. The program is based on the theory that language is learned best when there is a need to understand and communicate in that language. All students are eligible for enrollment in the multi-age classes. The Montgomery County curriculum is followed using French materials. Standardized test results show the immersion students to be comparable in ability and achievement to their peers in English-speaking American classes and in French immersion classes in Canada. Parents, other adults, and high school students work in the classroom to assist the teachers and to learn French. The program's only added cost to the school system is for foreign language materials.

J'avais rêvé une fois que j'étais dans la classe de Mme Francis mais Mme Francis était plus jeune et j'étais plus vieille. J'étais le professeur et elle était moi et j'étais elle. C'était vraiment amusant parce que je savais toutes les choses en français, pas toutes les choses en anglais. Après j'ai dit à elle d'aller faire quelque chose et elle n'aime pas ça. Elle est juste allée le faire et après je lui ai demandé si elle aime ça, et elle a dit 'Non.' J'ai dit pourquoi est-ce que vous l'avez fait? Vous êtes le professeur parce que je savais vraiment qu'elle était le professeur. Dans ce cas j'étais le professeur. Elle a dit parce que vous êtes le professeur et après j'ai demandé à la classe de chanter 'Bon anniversaire' parce que c'était son anniversaire et elle avait cherché de la mousse au chocolat pour la classe. Après....

Ten-year-old Jeannie, an American child in an American public school, was telling me that she dreamed she was the teacher in her class and that her teacher wouldn't do what she told her to do. She explained that even though the teacher-student roles were reversed in her dream, she knew that her teacher was really the teacher. Had Jeannie been speaking to me in English, the speed of her speech and the nature of what she was saying would have been the same.[1] She and her

Gabriel H.L. Jacobs (ED.D., Hood University) is principal of Four Corners Elementary School, Silver Spring, Md.

1. I had this interview with Jeannie at her request and had her permission to record it.

classmates had been learning most of their school subjects for the previous two and a half years through the medium of the French language. All her reading and written school assignments, like those of her classmates, had been in French. The only subjects in which she received instruction in English were art, physical education, and music, because those specialist teachers were not speakers of French.

In many places in the world, formal instruction is conducted in a language different from the child's home language. For us at Four Corners, this was a new idea; it was our response to parental demands for a foreign language program. At first, the idea of immersion (home-school language switch)--as opposed to foreign language instruction--was greeted with skepticism by the parents, but a review of the considerable body of research that has been done in Canada on French immersion programs persuaded them of the benefits to be derived.

The major aims of our immersion program are for our children to master their school subjects and to acquire substantive fluency in French. The

Students learn most
of their school subjects
through the medium of French.

secondary purposes are for the children to acquire the benefits of increased cultural insights, to gain flexibility of approach in language and culture, and to increase their capacity for divergent thinking. From observing and testing our children and comparing our results with those of the Canadian immersion programs, we have no doubt that we are achieving the major purposes of our own program,[2] and we have a strong feeling that we are also accomplishing our secondary purposes.

Results of the Canadian studies have shown that children master their regular school subjects and gain substantial fluency in French while in the immersion programs. It has been found that if certain specific English language skills (such as capitalization and punctuation) are not taught, there is a slight deficit in these skills, but that this deficit is rapidly made up when the skills are taught later. These results are very much in keeping with what we have observed at Four Corners.

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One of the unanticipated benefits of our immersion program has been its effect on the rest of the school--those children in the regular English-medium program. Many of them now copy the French immersion children by greeting the immersion teachers and me in French. Furthermore, my practice of shaking hands with the immersion children when we greet each other has been adopted throughout the rest of the school. My conversations in French with the immersion children have enabled the other children to hear a foreign language used for practical purposes. For example, I use French when I ask immersion children to stop running in the halls, when I discuss with them the problems of lost lunch tickets and lunch boxes, or when I tell them the time for instrumental music lessons. This practice, as well as other aspects of the French immersion program, has intrigued the non-immersion children so much that they and their parents have requested some instruction for them in French.

2. See the summary of immersion sources at the conclusion of the article.

Starting the Program

Once we had worked with interested parents and the PTA Executive Committee, and had held discussions with the community as a whole, we approached the Area Director for Instruction and the Area Superintendent for permission to proceed with planning the program. (These are routine steps in Montgomery County when starting any new program.) These steps would, of course, differ in each school system, depending upon size and the nature of the community and school administrators. (Readers interested in more details about initiating such a program are welcome to write to me).

Once having received permission to proceed, we needed to find a teacher who would meet the qualifications for immersion teaching. The requirements were native speaking skills in French, experience and certification in teaching in the elementary school, the aptitude to develop materials for a new program, and outstanding rapport with children and adults. If the truth be known, we really wanted a miracle worker. Although we now have four classes of French immersion and have interviewed thirty-five candidates for the positions during the last four years, we have not yet found any one person who meets all of our standards. The two qualifications most difficult to find in combination are native speaking ability in French and experience and certification in elementary school teaching.

Teachers at Four Corners usually meet prospective staff members before they are hired; in the case of immersion teachers, we also involved parents. We were extremely fortunate to find in our first teacher (Marie-Cécile Francis) a person strong and flexible enough to meet the challenge of starting the program. Starting an immersion class in the United States was a lonely task. The literature from Canada and discussions with the Canadians were of great help, but the Canadians weren't available to answer the day-to-day questions that arose once we started. Our questions ranged from exactly how much French we should insist the children use in the first few weeks to how to deal with children who get discouraged listening to and receiving directions in a foreign language for five hours a day.

Language Experience and Foreign Language Learning

One learns any language best when one needs language. Children in school are aware that they need to learn how to read, write, and compute and to know something about science and social studies. They are upset when they are deprived of the opportunity to do these things. When placed in a French immersion class, the children have no choice but to acquire this knowledge through the medium of French. For those classes in which all the children are débutants (new to the program), there is a conscious effort by teachers to provide a great deal of language experience for the students through the use of 'hands-on' materials and activities. Manipulative materials in math, science, and social studies are used for instructional purposes and to encourage the children to speak about what they are doing with the materials. The teachers' strategies are constantly directed toward insuring that children see, hear,

Manipulative materials are used
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about what they are doing.

and speak about the materials being used. The students understand both the subject and the vocabulary, because the teachers constantly state and restate what is happening, while pointing to or manipulating objects. The teachers also use their hands and bodies to give clues to convey the meaning of what they are talking about. Furthermore, the teachers use every event, including distractions from the lesson, to state and restate

what the event or distraction is about--thereby giving the children a great deal of exposure to language where meaning is apparent. If meaning is not immediately apparent, repetition of the situation will make it so.

For the kindergarten or first-grade child, a good immersion experience is very much like a good, regular kindergarten or first grade: the children have a great deal of experience handling, talking about, and hearing the teacher talk about the materials they are to learn. There is much repetition and practice with simple tasks. The child is strongly encouraged to use actively the materials of instruction. In an immersion class, there is even more stress on experiences of this kind.

> We prefer that children spend at least 3 years in the immersion experience.

We have started children in immersion who are in grades one through six, although we have discouraged beginning the program in the fifth and sixth grades, because we prefer that children spend at least three years in the immersion experience. The older children are more nervous about being in immersion and missing the subject matter they need in order to do well in junior high school. They are also concerned because they are already familiar with much of the subject matter presented to them during their first year of immersion. It is not easy for a teacher to provide difficult abstract work for a student who is beginning to learn in a foreign language. One solution to this problem has been for us to integrate the older children new to immersion with students in established immersion classes who are of the same age. This enables them to learn French faster because they have both a teacher model and peer models who speak French. In addition, since some of the students in the group are working at advanced levels, it gives them more contact with material suitable for their age.

We have found that although it is initially a greater strain on débutants to be in a class where they are the only ones who do not know the language of instruction, they catch up quickly once the early difficulties are overcome. At the end of their first year in an immersion class, their ability in French appears to match that of the children who have been working in French immersion for two years. Although we prefer to integrate débutants into established classes because it accelerates their learning of French and reduces the problems of starting with an entire class of débutants, we feel that if the number of new students in an experienced immersion class exceeds twenty-five percent, there is a diminution of the learning of French.

Reading

Formal instruction in reading is avoided until the middle of the child's first year in an immersion class, regardless of the child's grade level. We feel that these students do not have sufficient knowledge of French for the written word to make sense, and we don't want them to read meaningless words. Before formal reading instruction takes place, reading is introduced in a multiplicity of informal ways, much as in any primary classroom. Experience charts, labels on objects in the room, pictures and exercises using words, and many other techniques are used. We have found that second

> Although we do not teach first graders how to read in English, they do so in any case.

graders and older children begin reading in French fairly rapidly after they have been in immersion for five months, and often sooner. For the first graders, the process is much the same as it is in an English class, except that the children have less knowledge of the French language to bring to their reading than they do of English.

Although we do not teach our first graders how to read in English, we have found that they do so in any case. When tested in third grade, a group of children who had begun French immersion in first grade did well in English reading comprehension,[3] although they had been given no formal instruction. Our older children's reading ability in English seems unimpaired in spite of the fact that they have not had instruction in reading in English for several years. We use phonics, the whole-word approach, and other variations of these methods in our formal reading instruction in French. The emphasis is on reading for meaning.

Curriculum and Organization of Instruction

Our approach to the curriculum has been to follow as closely as possible the curriculum of the Montgomery County Public Schools. In beginning immersion classes, somewhat more time is spent in hands-on manipulative work in math and science than is spent in regular classes in order for the children to learn sufficient French to prepare them to do more abstract academic work. This type of activity lends itself to learning a great deal of the target language. We do not start teaching English language skills on a formal basis until the third or fourth year of the program.

To augment the math curriculum of the County, we have used the Addison-Wesley Math Series, which has been translated into French in Canada. We generally try to avoid using translated materials, but, in view of the lack of materials that cover our curriculum, we have been forced to take occasional shortcuts. In social studies, we have had to use selections from a wide variety of French publications. When the students' research needs go beyond what we have on hand in French, we encourage them to use English materials from the school library. Map skills do not require an in-depth knowledge of French. In science, much of the County curriculum is tied to inquiry approach units such as those in SCIS (Science Instructional System) and ESS (Elementary Science Study). They, too, can be done in French by children who have a limited French background.

We generally try
to avoid translated materials.

We have taught the children to write in the French style in order to give their handwriting a distinctive appearance and with the hope that better legibility will result. We have stressed teaching children in French those things that are new to them, because we feel that this approach combines the advantages of high interest in the material with the need to learn and use French. It also helps in the development of the children's conceptual skills in the second language.

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Learning a foreign language through subject matter has the advantage of presenting the learners with the unpredictable; they don't know the subject matter ahead of time and can't predict

3. Measurement instruments were the Holt Reading Inventory, the Iowa Tests, informal reading inventories, and our observations.

exactly what is going to be said or read. This forces them to learn more actively. Obviously, what is presented to them must not be too unpredictable, or they will not understand it. They need to have enough context to have most of their predictions make sense and just enough unknowns to keep them alert.

Our first immersion class included children in grades one through three. A combination of philosophical preference and necessity dictated this arrangement. We did not have in any one grade a sufficient number of children whose parents wanted them in French immersion to justify establishing an entire class in that grade. We have continued with combination grade classes in order to give ourselves the greatest flexibility possible in the placement of children as well as the advantages of multi-age grouping. This grouping has also made it easier to integrate children of various ages who are new to the program into established classes. This year, as part of a new Montgomery County program to promote voluntary integration, we have four immersion classes with approximately half of the children drawn from outside of the school's attendance area. The classes are grouped as follows: (1) a grade three through six combination, 40 percent of whom are fourth-year immersion students, 35 percent second-year students, and 25 percent débutants; (2) a four through six combination of whom 50 percent are second-year students, 25 percent are fourth-year students, and 25 percent are débutants; (3) a grades one-two combination in which all but two (second-year) students are débutants; and (4) a grades two-three combination of whom 75 percent are second-year students, and 25 percent are débutants.

> Our subjective opinion is that the immersion students have suffered no loss in any academic area.

Immersion in general, and this kind of organization specifically, require a great deal of planning and extra effort on the part of the teachers, It is not too difficult to manage different levels of work simultaneously, but when the students' levels of ability in French also differ, the task becomes formidable. Furthermore, we are generally on our own in terms of the immense task of finding material in French that covers our curriculum. Many of the Canadian school systems with immersion programs have specialists who devote considerable time to either locating or writing needed material.

Results

Since ours is not a research program, we have no controlled studies that compare our immersion students with either their peers in our non-immersion classes or with children in Canadian immersion programs. However, we have looked at the results of the Iowa Tests, the Cognitive Abilities Tests, the Holt Reading Inventory, and cloze tests. The results of these tests, our observations of the children, our discussions with their parents, and the comments of outside observers who have worked with our children substantiate our subjective opinion that our immersion students have suffered no loss in any academic area and have even achieved beyond expectation in some of them.

Our children have achieved in the mid-range for Francophone students of the same age on tests administered by the Commission des Ecoles Catholiques de Montréal. This is not to say that they have the same ability in French as native-speaking French Canadian children, but that they have achieved equivalent scores on the tests of mathematics and French language. Comments about the children's skill in communicating in French from native French speakers who have visited the program and talked with them reinforce our belief in the success of the program.

Admission of Children and Orientation of Parents to the Immersion Program

The sole criterion we have used for admission of a child to the program has been the date of application. All children whose parents apply are admitted if there is sufficient space. We arrange our classes so that they are as heterogeneously grouped as possible. We want our classes to represent a cross section of children in every possible sense, not just academically. For instance, our immersion classes contain approximately the same percentage of children who participate in the free lunch program as the rest of the school.

Orientation of parents to the program is an essential element. During the first year, we learned what some of the concerns of the children and parents were, as well as what stresses the immersion program places on the children; we now have a fairly precise idea of what to expect. During our orientation, we stress the disadvantages as well as the advantages of having a child in the program. To those parents who have already made a positive decision, the advantages seem obvious: gaining substantial fluency in French, mastery of regular subject matter, and the other benefits that speaking another language brings. The disadvantages are sometimes difficult to deal with, and we try to prepare parents for some of the problems their children will face. From the very first day, immersion requires beginners to function in a foreign language for five hours a day. This is a strain which may manifest itself by restlessness in school, using the lack of understanding French as an excuse to misbehave, or a demand to leave the program. We urge parents not to give their children a choice about entering the program, because the right to make the decision to enroll implies the right to make the decision to withdraw. We also tell parents that we will be glad to help families adjust to the program, but that we will not remove a child from the program before five months have elapsed.[4] We mention that older children (third grade and up) have more difficulties, and also warn them that during the time these children are learning sufficient French to do school work at their level, they may suffer a temporary lag in their academic work.

> All children whose parents apply are admitted if there is sufficient space.

We ask parents to make a visible (i.e., to the child) commitment to the program upon entry. Among the suggestions we make are that parents involve themselves--by becoming volunteer classroom aides, joining our adult French classes, talking in French at home, and attending parent meetings. If the children do not sense that their being in immersion is very important to their parents, they may feel that they are being placed in a trying situation (which is different from and more demanding than a regular school program) for no apparent reason. A visible commitment, therefore, is a significant factor for success.

We have frequent meetings with parents to review what has been done in class, outline our plans, answer questions, and discuss problems. Staff as well as parents have learned a great deal at these meetings, and they are often the source of amusing anecdotes. For instance, one parent reported that her child came home and said, "We didn't have any French today." Apparently he had understood everything in class and because of this assumed that the work had been in English!

Volunteers and Aides

Volunteers have been an important part of the success of the program. Parents of children in the

4. Not including those children who have moved out of the area, we lose about one or two children per year from each immersion class.

program have put in many hours. The few who speak French have been able to help directly in working with children. Most do not speak French but have taken groups of children to see French films in the library, assisted in the preparation of materials, helped with cooking projects, and so forth. Some parents have helped because of a desire to learn French; some have participated out of curiosity. Whatever their reasons, their help has been invaluable.

A visible commitment by the parents is a significant factor in student success.

The opportunity to learn French has attracted other volunteers, including high school students. After a year of putting in three or more hours a day for five days a week, some have become fluent in French to a degree that is rarely achieved in high school (or even in college). The program has attracted many visitors, including many native French speakers. Whenever possible, we put them to work in the classroom so that our children may be exposed to more than one variety of spoken French.

Costs and Problems

The costliest aspects of our program have been the acquisition of French materials and the extra time necessary to set up and expand the program. Normally, a school has a collection of textbooks, library books, and other materials available for use in teaching the curriculum. A new program in a language other than English requires an enormous number of materials in all subjects, and these must somehow be found and paid for.

Since the immersion program at Four Corners was designed as part of our normal curriculum and did not involve hiring more teachers than were justified by the number of students, we have had no extra personnel costs. There is, however, an extra burden in teaching immersion. It is not easy to give all instruction, deal with the children's personal problems, and control the behavior of a class in a language that is foreign to the students. We owe our success to the extraordinary work and dedication of immersion teachers.

From my visits and discussions with the Canadians who are conducting immersion programs, I find that we in the United States are faced with some unique problems. In Canada, the desire for bilingualism is recognized as a major force, even by those who do not agree that it is necessary. In the United States, a much smaller percentage of the population recognizes the benefits of bilingualism. Therefore, it requires some degree of nonconformity and passion to initiate and sustain an immersion program in this country. The results of the effort are extremely rewarding. To have watched children in our school start to use French in a fumbling manner and eventually conduct all of their activities with ease and assurance in this language has been like seeing a dream come true. Although I have a working knowledge of French, our third- and fourth-year children now look down on my French skills. Three years ago, they did not believe me when I told them that someday they would be better than I.

We have had no extra personnel costs, but have had to acquire many materials in French for all subject areas.

APPENDIX

Immersion Research and Programs[5]

Those interested in reports of research on immersion programs should consult the large body of literature published on the Canadian experience. Among the pertinent general references are Wallace E. Lambert and G. Richard Tucker, Bilingual Education of Children: The St. Lambert Experiment (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1972); Antonio Simões Jr., The Bilingual Child: Research and Analysis of Existing Educational Themes (New York: Academic Press, 1976); and B.C. Bain, "Bilingualism and Cognition," in Bilingualism, Biculturalism, and Education, ed. S. Carey (Edmonton, Alberta: University of Alberta Press, 1974). These works treat in detail issues concerning child development in relation to language, culture, cognition, attitudes, classroom, curriculum, and evaluation. They also provide useful bibliographic information.

The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (252 Bloor Street West, Toronto) publishes the series Working Papers on Bilingualism, which includes numerous works on immersion. Issue No. 1 contains an article by Dumas, Selinker, and Swain entitled "L'apprentissage du français langue seconde en classe d'immersion dans un milieu torontois" (ED 122 586); Barik, Swain, and McTavish are the authors of "Immersion Classes in an English Setting: One Way for Les Anglais to Learn French" (ED 122 589), which appears in Issue No. 2. There are two articles on immersion classes in Issue No. 5: Cohen's "Successful Immersion Education in North America" (ED 125 241), and Bruck, Rabinovitch, and Oates's "The Effects of French Immersion Programs on Children with Language Disabilities--A Preliminary Report" (ED 125 242). In Issue No. 7 is an article by Swain entitled "Writing Skills of Grade Three French Immersion Pupils" (ED 125 262). "Alternative Forms of Immersion of Second Language Teaching" by Bruck, Lambert, and Tucker is in Issue No. 10 and deals with starting thirteen and fourteen-year-olds in immersion classes (ED 126 726). Chaudron discusses teachers' priorities in correcting learners' errors in French immersion classes in Issue No.12 (ED 135 232), and Harley and Swain have analyzed verb form and function in the speech of French immersion pupils in Issue No. 14. OISE has also published Barik and Swain's evaluations of the 1974-75 French immersion program in the Ottawa-Carleton public schools, including a comparison of the performance of these pupils with that of the children in the regular English program (ED 121 056) and an evaluation of the 1975-76 French immersion program in grades 3-5. This study also reports on differences in achievement and IQ between the immersion and control groups. Also of significant interest are the evaluations of the various French immersion programs in Montreal by Genesee, Morin, and Allister published by the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal in 1974, and H.H. Stern's evaluations of experimental French immersion programs in Ottawa published by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (1976).

An article that relates the teaching of English as a foreign language to immersion and lists success factors in immersion programs is "Bilingual Education: The 'Immersion' Model in the North American Context" by Cohen and Swain (TESOL Quarterly, 10, March 1976.)

A brief history of the first immersion program, "The Benefits of Bilingualism" by Lambert and Tucker, can be found in the September 1973 issue of Psychology Today.

5. All documents identified by an ED number may be read on microfiche at an ERIC library collection or ordered from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service, P.O. Box 190, Arlington, VA 22210.

Some of the boards of education that are deeply involved in immersion programs in Canada are:

Carleton Board of Education
133 Greenbank Road
Ottawa, Ontario

Ottawa Board of Education
330 Gilmour
Ottawa, Ontario K2P OP9

South Shore Protestant Regional School Board 6
Desaulniers Boulevard
St. Lambert, Quebec

Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal
Montreal, Quebec

In the United States the following public schools are conducting immersion programs:

Eugene Ziff
El Marino School
11430 Port Road
Culver City, CA 90230
(Spanish--began in 1971)

Gabriel Jacobs
Four Corners Elementary School
325 University Boulevard West
Silver Spring, MD 20901
(French--began in 1974)

Violet Fier
Palma Ceia School
Hayward Unified School District
Box 5000
Hayward, CA 94545
(Spanish--began in 1976)

Anthony Gradisnik
Milwaukee Public Schools
5225 West Vliet Street
Milwaukee, WI 53201
(German--began in 1977)

Harold Wingard
San Diego City Schools
Education Center
4100 Normal Street
San Diego, CA 92103
(Spanish--began in 1977)

The demonstration school at Plattsburgh, New York, started a French immersion program with a strong research component in September 1976 and has a videotape report of its first year. The tape may be obtained on loan by contacting Paul E. Dammer, Chief, Bureau of Foreign Languages Education, New York State Education Department, Albany, NY 12234.

Four Corners has also produced a twenty-minute videotape explaining immersion and has published a teacher's manual on immersion which may be purchased from the school for $1.00.

Volunteers have been
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